

Service of Commemoration

Earl Clement Davis

May 22, 1946

Hale Chapel, First Church in Boston

The forest endures though every tree be slain. Here and there a tree no longer responds to the onrushing tide of life. Yet here and there fresh young life fills in the gaps. The forest endures, enriched by and absorbing the nutriment contributed by the fruits of yesterday's strong and productive trees. It is refreshing and vitalizing to think thus of the men whom we would honor today as rugged trees in a forest of life. Their roots have found their way deep and wide into the soil of reality; out of the past they have absorbed nourishing humus of the ages; into the sun and storms of the world about they have reached with their ever widening limbs, somehow confident that what they have absorbed from the soil of the past belongs to the sun-warmed world of the future.

As we call to mind the personalities and the work of the twenty-one men who were with us yesteryear, we are impressed by the profound changes in the world during the period that their lives cover. Each knew some of these men intimately; all knew them as from a little distance. Again and again we ponder on that mysterious inner compulsion that sent them on the great adventure of the interpretation of religion as these years of the modern advance upon us. Of old it has been said that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding." True enough it may be that "The Fear of The Lord is the beginning of wisdom," but century after century of ever widening experience deepened the understanding. Then came a man out of Nazareth who could say to his own people, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Perchance in the days of their youth when life lay before them each of these had a moment, a mysterious moment when he felt the inner compulsion that the Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Perchance each learned in the enriching process of life that the old phrases have a real meaning: to be aware of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and to overcome evil with good is understanding.

For the most part the men whom we honor today centered their lives about the Parish Ministry, and its implied interests. But their minds and interests ranged beyond parochial limitations and embraced a sense of the universality of discovering and seeking an interpretation of life and its meaning and destiny. Achieving a sense of freedom in a particular field, one could vicariously enter into the spirit and the lives of those explorers in regions beyond the Parish and the Church. Kipling has a line that suggests both the scope and the intensity of the adventurous approach to life.

Till a voice, as bad a Conscience, rang interminable
changes
On one everlasting Whisper day and night repeated—
so:
"Something hidden. Go and find it. Go and look
behind the ranges—
Something lost behind the ranges. Lost and waiting
for you. Go."¹

What a period these lives cover? Christopher G. Eliot was born Jan. 20, 1856 in St. Louis, just as the storm of the Civil War was developing. Charles Brown Elder was born in Portland, Me, Feb 16, 1856, while the clipper ships were still venturing into all parts of the world. Both were lads of three when the Origin of the [sic] Species was published to introduce into the world of Evolution. The machine age was on the way; the Spanish War carried us into the far Pacific; industrial conflicts developed; the World War I, to be followed by a period of expansion, collapse, World War II, all of which are outbreaks of a worldwide Revolution, where the onmoving [sic] forces of humanity are seeking to find their rightful place in the awe-inspiring world and university that men of the modern world have been discovering and describing. How directly and insistently these titanic majestic forces impinge upon our lives, touch every aspect of the ministry of religion, yea, even enter the inmost secret chambers of our spiritual life, probing and examining every belief, every symbol, every cherished custom and tradition through which we have felt ourselves tied into the whole world process. What an age these men have lived in? How formidable and how alluring, how compelling are the prospects of the new age which we have already begun to call the Atomic Age.

¹ Rudyard Kipling, excerpt from "The Explorer," 1898.

Each one of us knew some of these men intimately, so intimately that we absorbed from them something of their spirit, something of that inner compulsion which is revealed only in rare moments, but which gives character to life. I have known one or two of them in such moments. I have seen glimpses of that quality in others. Out of these fragmentary incidents we get a hint of what they have given to us and to those in whose midst they have lived and worked, and thus to the age in which they have lived.

I can tell you only what I have seen glimpses of in them and have found confirmation of in the heritage of the ages. How varied the qualities and the characteristics of these men? Parish ministers, teachers, social workers. How marked their individual personalities? Behind the ranges of their clothes, their pounds of flesh, their living bodies, something hidden. Go and find it. Here is what they have told me, they and the ages behind them. Millions of years before St. John wrote the words the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, that was a fact. The Spirit that was in them, the Spirit that was in Jesus, the Spirit that gave each a moment when he could think to himself, "The Spirit of the Lord is Upon me," is the spirit in the nature of things that appears in us as Personality, thinking remembering, hoping human beings. That spirit dwells in our flesh.

Behind that range of mountains, still there is something hidden. Lurking in the background of our struggle for existence, our love of life and for life, our day's work, our toil and our joys, appears that strange and mysterious quality that compels us to choose the hard right instead of the easy wrong, that compels a Caepk to linger in the garden of Gethsemane, not for an evening but for months; that compels men to follow a line of duty even though it means the end of the life they love, and the breaking of ties with their own flesh and blood. You have seen glimpses of that in the men we honor; you have learned of it in these tragic years. It bespeaks a glimpse into an eternal significance, and an unbroken continuity of the long process which we share one with another and with the ages for our brief and exciting life of three or four score years more or less. How intimately and how insistent have the lives of these men spoken to us of the common yet profound words of daily life: duty, fidelity, integrity, purpose. From the mountain range of experience we discover

that the days of our years find their only abiding satisfaction in the discovery of a great purpose that gives life its dignity, and death its tragic beauty. For this gift of them to us we are beholden.

Thus these men, our associates in the life process, lead us to another range of mountains. Behind that range is something hidden. Go and find it. Why do we explore that range? Said the mountain climber, when asked why he risked his life just to climb a forbidding mountain, "Because it is there." Why do we guide our planes down the runway of solid reality, flesh, three score years and ten, life, purpose, achievement, failure, death? And then take off into the air of faith and imagination, to discover that hidden thing behind the mountain range of death? The answer is, "Because it is there, that snow-capped mountain range." In our imagination we have followed these companions of ours, we have felt the touch of that vital spark in them. We have seen it at work; through long and natural lives, through heroic death. We have seen it colored by the sunlight of an absorbing purpose. What of it? My own conviction is that this sense of individual personality, of continuity, of the whole implication of the life process, suggests to us that there is something hidden behind that mountain of death, that conservation of personality has a place in the Universe; that all the varied customs and beliefs of mankind in the face of this fact of death are but an imperfect and feeble expression of something that has its roots deep in the nature of things, deep in the heart of the life that dwells in us, and in the mysterious whole of things, for which our word God is a symbol.

A sergeant, waiting in a Fox-hole in New Guinea, during a lull in a hazardous climb, wrote a song. The Chorus began with this line: "Get your gear on, we're going out again."² That suggests what I have in mind. As we stand to read the names of these men, erstwhile companions of ours, in the ministry of religion, that they are still our companions affirms the deeper wisdom of the ages. Beyond this mountain range whose mystery we explore it still holds true that "there is nothing better than to be aware of the Lord, and nothing sweeter than his commandments."

² Song by Fred Hollier, Sr. (1924-2021). Slight misquote here; corrected, "Get your gear on, we're moving out again."